

The Number of the Demon

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Summary: What did Ackerson intend with the Spartan-III project? Why was it set up so far away from UNSC space? What is it protecting? A Covenant Ship Master and a certain familiar doctor race to answer these questions before it is too late. Ch. 2 posted!

1. Prologue

****THE NUMBER OF THE DEMON****

A Story in the Halo Universe

Written by Tamarallion Arothlin

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>DISCLAIMERS

The author does not own Halo, Halo 2, or any part thereof. Halo is property of Microsoft, Inc. No challenge to the status of these copyrights is intended.

I have read all of the books, but I am not in current possession of The Fall of Reach. I also do not own an Xbox, although I have played through both campaigns. Please excuse any discrepancies in the story or character.

Enough tedious stuff, enjoy!

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****Prologue****

Ninth Age of Reclamation, Step of Silence

_Covenant Holy City "High Charity", Sanctum of the Hierarchs

-

Human Date/Time: 0734 hours, September 6, 2552

The massive doors separating the Sanctum of the Hierarchs from the rest of the holy city split down the middle and groaned as they moved apart. Light from outside poured in through the widening crack, silhouetting a single figure just outside the doorway.

At the other end of the room, two red-robed figures hovered silently above the raised dais in ornamented hover-thrones. One of them beckoned silently for the figure to approach.

Ship Master Rala 'Kanthamee hesitated briefly before stepping over the threshold into the Sanctum. He had to admit to himself that he was at least a little nervous being called before the Hierarchs like this. He _thought _that he had performed well at Reachâ€| but Truth and Mercy could see far more clearly than he. Perhaps there was a flaw in himâ€"

He quickly banished the thoughts and strode towards the dais, head held as high as he could without appearing too presumptuous. The Prophets did not just punish those who failed the Covenant; they also rewarded those who served the Covenant faithfully and with skill. Perhaps he had attracted their attention in a favorable way.

'Kanthamee knelt in front of the dais and bowed, touching his helmeted head to the floor before straightening. "You requested my presence, noble Prophets?"

"Indeed so," Truth replied in an even voice that held no clue to the Prophet's intent. "You were present at the assault on the human fortress world? The one they called Reach?"

'Kanthamee replied with a nod, knowing full well that Truth had full details on the entire conflict. After all, the Hierarchs could see into his very soul.

Truth regarded him a moment longer before speaking again. "Rala 'Kanthamee, you have proven to be an effective instrument against the humans time and time again. You have served the Covenant with honor and skill in a great many conflicts. I believe it is time that you were given a command that made full use of your abilities."

With a startled expression on his mandibles, 'Kanthamee glanced up. What did Truth mean by that?

"Do not look so surprised," Mercy grated, moving alongside Truth. "We noted your effectiveness against the humans and so had one of our Eyes monitor your activities. Most Ship Masters do not waste time studying human tactics, much less implementing them."

Mercy paused, and 'Kanthamee sensed that a reply was necessary. "Noble Hierarchs, the humans should have been extinguished a decade ago. Somehow, however, they resist our ground forces without the aid of the Forerunners' holy technology and the wisdom of the Prophets. I wished to discover how."

"And it seems that your discoveries have been fruitful indeed," Truth interjected. "However, time is short and I wish to come to the point." 'Kanthamee sensed a slight rebuke of Mercy in those words, but quickly quelled the thought and blanked his expression lest Mercy feel offended. "You are familiar with the demon-soldiers employed by the humans?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Ship Master 'Kanthamee growled, letting his mandibles grind a little in frustration. The armored demons had proven to be incredibly powerful and resourceful enemies. The helmet of one that he had personally slain in combat was one of his favorite trophies.

"We have learned that one of the human leaders has begun to create an entire legion of demons." Truth's gaze bored into 'Kanthamee. "The leader intended to hide this plan from everyone" even the other humans" but he could not hide it from us."

'Kanthamee felt a thrill of terror and excitement all at once. An entire legion of demon-soldiers could storm High Charity itself and have a chance to succeed. Now, the Hierarchs were offering him a chance to stop this plan and put an end to human hopes of victory once and for all.

How could he possibly refuse?

"You do me far more honor than I deserve," 'Kanthamee replied, straining to keep the excitement and anticipation from his voice as he bowed again. "I will not betray your trust."

"I expected nothing less of you, Ship Master." The satisfaction in the Prophet's voice was faint, but clearly discernable. A projector orb floated silently to 'Kanthamee, who took it from the air and tapped the activation rune on top. The air above the orb flickered, then showed a rotating image of a powerful Firebrand-class Grand Cruiser, almost the equal of a carrier in firepower but lacking the troop-carrying capacity and extensive fighter bays. The ship design was new, recently recovered from artifacts discovered in another human system. 'Kanthamee cycled through the other ships, his old cruiser plus two smaller destroyers, and glanced at the equipment manifest. The Hierarchs were certainly not sending him unprepared.

"Your ships and soldiers await only your presence, Ship Master," Truth said. "Do not tarry, for every hour you lose is an hour that the humans have to complete their plans."

'Kanthamee bowed, then got to his feet. "I depart at once, then. Thank you for this opportunity, Noble Hierarchs." He turned and began to stride back towards the doors at the far end of the Sanctum.

"Do not thank us with words, Ship Master," Truth regarded 'Kanthamee's retreating back solemnly. "Thank us by fulfilling your duties, as you have never yet failed to do."

* * *

>As soon as the doors closed, Mercy turned to Truth with an irate expression. He tapped a control on his throne and a silvery field sprang up around them to keep their words from the guards below

them.<p><p>

"You have yet to explain to me why it is necessary to send so many of our best soldiers on a trivial mission to the edge of known space, _Prophet Truth. _Why now, when the humans are reeling from our might and the discovery of the Ark is nigh?"

Truth held up a claw. "You will have your answers, Mercy. Tell me, when you were examining Ship Master 'Kanthamee's activities and his record, did anything strike you as unusual?"

"Other than the fact that he examines and adapts human tactics, nothing."

"He thinks too much." Truth tapped the holo-pad of his throne and a tiny, shimmering picture of 'Kanthamee seated behind a terminal sprang into existence. "He, and many of the others I am assigning to his new command, has a history of questioning and examination. They are not content to know what we wish; instead, they also want to know _why _we wish it and what it means for those around them."

"Is this not admirable?" Mercy asked in puzzlement.

"No," Truth replied firmly. "Not in these times, with the Great Journey so close at hand. Obedience and loyalty are paramount above all other values.

"Besides, who can say what will happen?" An expression that could have passed for a smile appeared on Truth's face. "Perhaps the humans are ahead of schedule and some of the demons are ready for combat. 'Kanthamee will enjoy the fight of his life before the Great Journey sweeps him up. A fitting reward, no?"

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****AUTHOR'S NOTES****

This is my first venture into the Halo universe. Sorry about all the tedious setting-up (and there will be some more to come), but plenty of action and fun is in the offing!

2. Chapter One

****Chapter One****

System M2301

Near Serendipity Station

Human Date/Time: 1241 hours, September 20, 2552

"Uhhhâ€¦| state your name and verification again?"

The slim figure at the controls of the _Chioptera-_class scout vessel sighed in exasperation and punched the comm. A hint of irritation carried through in her voice as she gave the requested information. "Dr. Catherine Halsey, civilian consultant 409871. Verification code

alpha theta omega eight-seven-two-zero."

As Dr. Halsey clicked off the comm, a sage-armored figure filled the hatchway behind her. "Have we arrived in-system, ma'am?"

Dr. Halsey took a sip of coffee from a vacuum bottle before turning to face the Spartan. "We have indeed," she replied. "No sign of the Covenant yetâ€¦ for which I am extremely grateful. I believe that it will only be a matter of time, however."

SPARTAN-087, Kelly, gave a slight nod. "It will be good to face the Covenant again, ma'am."

Dr. Halsey hid her smile behind the vacuum bottle as she took another drink. Kelly had been more than a little irate after she had awakened from the tranquilizer, and even after Dr. Halsey's explanation, was doubtless itching to escape the claustrophobic vessel and get back into the action. It doubtless seemed to Kelly like an interminably long time since they had escaped from ONI's CASTLE base on Reach.

"Come on," Dr. Halsey muttered, turning back to the controls. "You may be Colonel Ackerson's pets, but you should still recognize a top-level code when it's given to you. Hurry upâ€¦"

"I doubt they can hear you, ma'am," Kelly commented with a dry chuckle.

That drew a laugh from Dr. Halsey, though it was more a laugh of nervous tension than amusement. She had been skirting the fine line between "unusual breadth of discretion" and "treason" for her entire career as a civilian consultant, and one of these days it was going to catch up to her. Today might be the dayâ€¦

The comm crackled and then a deeper, more authoritative voice came on. "Dr. Halsey, it's good to have you here. Docking instructions are being fed to your computer as we speak, and an orbital shuttle is being prepped. Welcome to Serendipity."

Dr. Halsey gasped in recognition. "Jared? Is that you?"

"Indeed. It's a long story, ma'amâ€¦ and one that I'll be able to tell you once you get dirtside. SPARTAN-164 over and out."

The gravity in the craft fluctuated as they automatically changed course, but Dr. Halsey did not feel it. Her mouth still hanging open in dumbfounded amazement, she turned to Kelly. Doubtless, the Spartan wore a similar expression under her mirrored visor.

"The Spartans that couldn't come to Reach," Dr. Halsey murmured. "What were the odds?"

"Ma'am, we always tend to turn up where and when we're most needed," Kelly pointed out with a chuckle. "If you're correct about the Covenant, we are going to need all of them." She paused a moment. "It is good to know that they are alive, however."

Dr. Halsey heard her unvoiced comment and smiled reassuringly. "John can take care of the others. Earth is safe with him protecting it."

"Yes, ma'am." Kelly sounded at least a little reassured.

The computer chirped and Dr. Halsey turned back to the forward viewscreen, now filled with the prefabricated space station in orbit around the azure world below them.

* * *

>The Pelican's engines spooled down, and the large cloud of dust and leaves swirling around the launch pad began to settle back to earth as the hydraulics of the rear hatchway hissed open. <p>Four figures snapped to attention as Dr. Halsey and Kelly disembarked from the dropship. Three were encased in Mjolnir Mark V armor, polished until its surfaces gleamed under M2301's yellow-white light. The fourth was a man in nondescript olive-drab fatigues. His hair was beginning to gray, but vital energy still radiated out from him and his eyes burned with fire.<p>

Dr. Halsey kept a smile from her face as she nodded to each of them. "Helen, Jared, Liliithâ€| and CPO Mendez. It is good to see all of you again."

A smile came to the face of Chief Petty Officer Mendez as he strode forward and offered his hand to Dr. Halsey, who accepted it. "Damâ€"ahem, excuse me. Darn good to see you again, ma'am. When the news came in that the Covenant had glassed Reachâ€| I thought they had gotten you too."

"We heard about the mission, but the _Reliant _was too far away," Jared added. "Did it succeed?"

For a moment, Dr. Halsey hesitated. She really did not feel like telling the whole story at that moment. "John's team is still pursuing it," she replied half-truthfully. "They will succeed. John has never failed in his mission."

The Spartans all nodded. Dr. Halsey felt sure that Kelly would spin out the tale for them once they were apart from her, but right now, it could wait. She wiped sweat from her brow with a sleeve and realized that the atmospheric temperature and humidity were both oppressively high â€" strange, given that the landscape around them resembled an African savannah more than a tropical rain forest.

Mendez seemed to sense her thoughts. "It gets pretty hot outside when Serendipity is closest to M2301, ma'am. There are two Warthog LRVs parked down in front. Let's get on back to Silversword Base so you can tell us what's going on."

Dr. Halsey followed Mendez and the Spartans down to the idling vehicles at the base of the landing platforms. She noted the impressive single-barreled guns that they were sporting and commented on it to Jared.

"Gauss cannons, ma'am," Jared replied with a hint of excitement in his voice. "Downsized MAC guns like the ones on our capships. New stuff from RD that was sent here not two weeks ago. They'll put a hole right through the armor of a Scorpion battle tank."

Senior Chief Petty Officer Jared jumped into the driver's seat of one of the 'Hogs, while Helen and Lilith took shotgun and the gunner's seat, respectively. Mendez jumped behind the wheel of the other one and Kelly clambered up onto the gauss mount, leaving Dr. Halsey the passenger seat. She fastened her restraints and made sure to check them twice " if her memory served her correctly, CPO Mendez was not exactly a defensive driver.

Her hunch was confirmed as both of the vehicles roared off at full speed, pinning her back against the barely-cushioned seat until they were at full speed. Dirt and bits of grass flew behind them as they made a beeline for the hills in the distance.

"It's going to be a two-hour ride, Doctor," Mendez said over the noise of the Warthog's engine. "Might as well tell me what you're doing here. The sooner I can start helping you, the better."

Dr. Halsey considered this a moment, then nodded. "All right. But first things first " you're running the training program for the SPARTAN-III project. Am I correct?"

She sensed the surprise emanate from Mendez, even though his facial expression didn't change. "Right on, Doctor," he replied after a moment. "Did you and Ackerson get back on good terms?"

"No," she replied coldly. "I despise him and all that he stands for. He despises me, too. His AI threatened to kill me back at CASTLE base."

Mendez blinked, then nodded. "I pretty much figured that was the case. And don't worry, Doctor." He turned to look at her, causing Dr. Halsey to wish very much that he would keep his attention on the ground in front of him. "I'm not doing this for Ackerson. As far as I can see, Ackerson's a lying, scheming son of a bitch that ought to be spaced along with all the Covies. I'm doing this for the rest of the human race."

Dr. Halsey nodded, feeling relief course through her veins. It was good to know that Mendez was firmly on her side.

"I'm sure you've already figured some of this out," the Chief continued, turning his attention back to driving. "Ackerson never did think much of the SPARTAN program's enhancements. He thought that the war should be fought and won by humans, not 'freaks'. However, he was especially interested in the cloning aspect of the program. The first stage of the SPARTAN-III project was to clone a number of duplicates of each of the original program members, with various modifications to aid in telling them apart. Except for one." Mendez grinned, a fearsome sight even when reflected in the 'Hog's windscreen. "There's only one 'John'. And I think you'll enjoy meeting her."

With a start, Dr. Halsey turned to look at him. "_Her?_"

"That's right. This 'John' is female. And she's one of the best damn commanders I've ever seen."

Dr. Halsey could only shake her head. This was going to take some getting used to.

"Ackerson's original plan was to create an entire regiment of

SPARTAN-IIIs," Mendez continued. "We didn't have enough cloning capacity to do it, though, so he settled for a reinforced battalion. I'm training them like the Helljumpers, only I'm taking everything a step or two further."

All Dr. Halsey could do was shake her head. An entire reinforced battalion of young men and women who had the best genetic makeup of the entire human race. She could scarcely believe it. It thrilled her and frightened her. Who was to say what defects might be caused by the cloning setup? What if Ackerson and his cronies hadn't gotten it right?

Was she really ready to meet more Kellys and Lindas and

She banished the thought. All of the soldiers in SPARTAN-III were unique individuals, despite their genetics. She would fight to preserve every last one of their lives, even if it meant losing her own.

"A full briefing will have to wait until we are at the base," Dr. Halsey spoke at last. "However, I'll give you the short form now."

"While I was at CASTLE base, I had some time to look through Ackerson's pet projects file after I sent Araquiel to digital oblivion. I found a folder marked 'S-III', which contained only a fragment that Kalimya was able to decipher the coordinates of this world and your initials."

"Nice of Ackerson to remember me like that," Mendez commented with a smirk.

Dr. Halsey fought back her sadness at the loss of Kalimya and continued. "When I had some time to spend with Cortana, I got her help in decrypting some other files that I found. Ackerson knew of a Forerunner facility under Reach and he also suspected the presence of one here. Not just any Forerunner facility, but an archive, if you will. A place where their collective knowledge could all be held safely in the case of a Flood outbreak. The Halo installation that John explored contained a Library, but that facility contained only a fraction of the Forerunners' total knowledge. What I am hoping most of all is that when we find this archive, it will contain translation software of some sort."

CPO Mendez gave a low whistle, steering to avoid the carcass of something that looked suspiciously like a lion. "That would be handy. All the advantages of the Covenant, and a whole lot more."

"But there were other data taps," Halsey continued, readjusting her glasses. "Cortana concluded that they came from a Covenant AI like the one she found." She was really getting tired of omitting these things. "Found on a Covenant computer."

Mendez gave her a sharp look. "A Covenant AI?"

"They learn quickly, Mendez. Show the Covenant something once, and they will be able to mimic it perfectly. Which is why it is so vital that we keep the Archive from falling into their hands wherever it is, and wherever they are."

"Count on it," Mendez replied. "We have four SPARTAN-IIIs and a battalion that has more raw promise than any I've ever seen. Ackerson supplied us with plenty of heavy equipmentâ€¦ Scorpion MBTs, chainguns, Pelicans, even a small squad of Longswords. We have the _Reliant_ and the _Courageous_ lurking in the asteroid belt, and they're two of the finest ships in the entire UNSC Navy. But more importantly, _we know we can win._" Mendez turned to look at the Doctor again. "The battle is fought in the mind before the battlefieldâ€¦ and we've won that one. Now, all that remains is to let the Covenant know they're not welcome whenever they _do_ _show up."

Dr. Halsey couldn't help but have her spirits be raised at the Mendez' confidence. She knew, however, that when the Covenant wanted something, they wouldn't give up until it was in their hands.

Either way, she was in for a lot of work over the next little while.

She tried to settle back in the Warthog's uncomfortable seat, knowing that it was probably the most quiet time she'd get for the rest of the month.

* * *

>Author's Notes

Sorry about all the tedious background, but I didn't see much way to skip it. Hope that it's at least somewhat interesting. Action is coming in the next chapter, even if it is simulated.

The first bit is more contingent than I would like on having read Halo: First Strike. Hopefully, it's possible to understand this story without having read the book. Succeeding chapters will probably make more sense as they don't have to tie in with First Strike's plot as much.

Let me know about anomalies in Mendez' character, especially, since it's been a long time since I've read The Fall of Reach.

Thanks, all, and don't forget to review!

3. Chapter Two

****Chapter Two****

In Slipspace

Covenant Grand Cruiser Flame of Righteous Wrath

Human Date/Time: ERROR â€" Slipspace Transit In Progress

As Rala 'Kanthamee materialized and looked around, it was hard for him to believe that the box canyon around him, complete with chirping avian animals in the scattered trees and a graceful base structure towering above his head, was completely a fabrication of the Forerunners' holy simulation computers. He could see and feel everything just as it was in life â€" even the dirt under his hooves shifted as he altered his stance.

The simulation computers had been an incredible boon to the warriors of the Covenant when they were discovered. Not only did the sims provide a perfect means of training and preparation, they also ensured that the long slipspace transits between worlds would not grow dull and boring.

'Kanthamee's mandibles opened in a grin. Today would not be dull in the least.

Today's simulation pitted him against the SpecOps commander, Jara 'Lystramee. He had gotten the definite impression that 'Lystramee thought he should be in charge of ground operations, not some _Ship Master_. 'Kanthamee was determined to prove otherwise.

"Procure the sacred banner," a thunderous voice boomed from everywhere at once. Rala 'Kanthamee bowed his head in reverence to the spirit of the Forerunner, then opened comm channels to the rest of his team, dispersed throughout the base and surrounding area.

"Nameless One, procure the beam rifle and cover me," 'Kanthamee snapped briskly. "I will secure the Fuel Rod in the central area. 'Thalamee, crew the Wraith and cover the teleportation matrix. 'Lanthamee and 'Ilimee, crew the Specter and prepare for the first attempt on their sacred banner. 'Duramee, take the Banshee and defend our banner while discerning the movements of our enemies. Questions? No? Move! We will not allow those black-armored skulkers to embarrass us!"

The Sangheili under his command roared their approval in unison, then scurried to their tasks. 'Kanthamee dashed ten strides to the Ghost, hopping on the seat and activating the Ghost's booster system in one fluid move. Creature and machine sped away with only an afterimage of blue light to mark their passing.

A howl of exhilaration escaped from 'Kanthamee as his Ghost flew through the air on the downside of a hill, its hoverdrive losing contact with the ground for a single exhilarating moment before touching down again. Another hillock raced towards him, and 'Kanthamee leaned forward to keep the Ghost firmly on the ground. It crested the hill and raced down towards the fuel rod gun lying on the earth. This particular weapon was vital to control, for it could reliably counter enemy armor as well as any Sangheili foolish enough to wander into its sights.

'Kanthamee glanced up just in time to see another Ghost crest the hill, ridden by one of 'Lystramee's SpecOps soldiers. Twin streams of blue plasma burst from each Ghost as the two pilots circled each other, trying to draw a bead.

The SpecOps soldier might have been talented, but he was not experienced in vehicular combat. His plasma bursts all failed to lead the moving 'Kanthamee, who took a moment to calculate the speed of the SpecOps Ghost before opening up. A storm of ravenous blue plasma blasts stabbed into and through the carapace of the jetbike, causing sparking overloads and eruptions of superheated plasma. The black-armored Sangheili had only a moment to roar in frustration before the plasma bursts cut through his shields, burned through his flesh, and sent his smoking carcass tumbling to the

ground.

'Kanthamee permitted himself a brief smirk before he sped back to the fuel rod, dropping his plasma rifle and securing the massive weapon to his harness. He was about to re-mount when the telltale scream of a boosting Ghost reached his ears. _He's committing his second one already? _'Kanthamee wondered before he caught a glimpse of the vehicle " and its white-armored rider.

'Lystramee was coming right for him.

There was only time for a snap-shot, which 'Kanthamee took. The green ball blasted into the Ghost's carapace, flinging burning conduits and small pieces of scorched armor in all directions. He dropped to a knee as the vehicle flipped end-over-end right above his head. He turned to see 'Lystramee, above all odds, land the battered Ghost and turn to face him again. Plasma bursts scorched the air around him, one or two flaring at the edge of his shield.

_A worthy challenge, _'Kanthamee thought with satisfaction, remounting his Ghost and boosting out to meet 'Lystramee.

"Nameless One," 'Kanthamee barked over the comm. "Cover 'Lystramee, but _do not fire _until I give the word. If he wants an honorable duel, I will oblige him."

"Acknowledged. Luck and skill, Excellency," the disgraced warrior rasped.

'Lystramee certainly knew his way around a Ghost, that was for certain. Plasma bursts splashed across 'Kanthamee's Ghost, burning neat holes in the carapace. A slugging match between them would be inconclusive " 'Kanthamee wanted to win in such a way that it was obvious who was more skilled. He tapped his boost control, coming right up alongside the SpecOp leader's vehicle, then turned to roast the Sangheili with plasma at point-blank range. With no vehicle between him and the weapons, 'Lystramee's shields drained rapidly and flickered. Two bursts penetrated, scorching armor and flesh before the SpecOps commander boosted away behind a rock to recharge. 'Kanthamee gnashed his mandibles in frustration " if it hadn't been for 'Lystramee's upgraded shields, he would have been dead. Temporarily, at least. He pursued at full speed, firing as he went.

The two Ghosts threaded their way between the jutting rocks, neither one able to corner the other long enough to inflict a telling blow. 'Kanthamee became increasingly frustrated, aware that as they fought, the sacred banner could be in danger. Finally, he saw his chance: 'Lystramee had high-centered his Ghost on a rock and blown out the grav suspension. With a satisfied grin and a bit of gloating laughter, 'Kanthamee opened up.

The entire world disappeared in an avalanche of blue-silver plasma with an accompanying roar that vibrated 'Kanthamee's entire body. He cried out involuntarily as he flew through the air, grav-restraints still holding him to the burned wreck of his Ghost. A series of sharp impacts drained the rest of his shield as he slid along the ground. Pain seared along his nerves. It was like taking a full magazine of needler ammunition at point-blank range.

As 'Kanthamee's vision cleared, he found himself lying out near where he had retrieved the fuel rod. Lumbering ominously towards him was the gigantic shape of a Wraith tank " and scooting ahead of that was 'Lystramee's Ghost.

Rage flared in 'Kanthamee, suppressing the pain as he came to his hooves. _That" that coward! He feigned disability to bring me in for his tank to destroy! _His fuel rod gun lay thirty feet away " it might have been a mile, for all the good that it did him. 'Lystramee would run him over before he could even think of firing it.

"Nameless One," 'Kanthamee growled, "I have lost my patience with 'Lystramee. Kill him."

The reply came in a pinkish-white beam of light that almost delicately impaled 'Lystramee's head. It held for a moment before the Sangheili's skull exploded in a violet mist. As the commander toppled off, the riderless Ghost drifted to a halt near 'Kanthamee.

Rala 'Kanthamee was already in motion. He snatched up the fuel rod gun from where it had fallen and shouldered it. "'Duramee, strafe the Wraith," he ordered. "Make it expose its rear."

"Gladly, Excellency," 'Duramee replied. A moment later, blue-white plasma from the Banshee's cannons began to melt into the Wraith's carapace. The Wraith's main gun fired, but 'Duramee sideslipped and the blast did nothing but explode a sapling into vapor. In a vain attempt to track the fast-moving flyer, the Wraith turned ponderously " exposing its weak rear armor to 'Kanthamee's fuel rod gun.

Three shots later, the tank burst apart in an eruption of plasma and blackened Sangheili flesh

'Kanthamee opened a channel to his forces. "Now is the time to capture their banner! They will not have time to arm themselves after reloading! Prepare to assault! Nameless One, move to a position to better cover their base."

A chorus of acknowledgements came through as 'Kanthamee remounted the Ghost. Already an enemy Specter was moving to counterattack, but it was caught between his Ghost, 'Duramee's Banshee and their Specter. It went down quickly.

The grav vehicles sped over the hillocks until the enemy base came into view. Two pink beams stabbed through the air and 'Ilimee cried out in frustration as the particle beams blew through his shields and threw his broken body from the pilot seat of the Specter. It drifted aimlessly now, a glorified gun turret. Two shots later and it was not even that.

The sniper, however, had given away his position. As he sprinted for the teleporter, a ball of blue-silver plasma from the Wraith's main cannon engulfed him. When the shot faded, he was no more.

"The rest will be inside the base," 'Kanthamee predicted, dismounting from the Ghost and shouldering the fuel rod cannon. "I will clean them up and move back to our base with the sacred banner."

"Good luck, Excellency!" 'Thalamee wished him. "I will endeavor to

retrieve the banner should you fall."

'Kanthamee laughed and strode into the base. Four black-armored figures faced him, all holding glittering plasma swords in their grasp. One of them looked familiar â€" he had been the one in the first Ghost and had respawned.

_This, _'Kanthamee thought, _will be fun._

The first two SpecOp Sangheili were slain with two fuel rod rounds apiece as they attempted to rush 'Kanthamee. Another ducked behind a corner and started hosing 'Kanthamee with plasma fire. Not even bothering to take cover, 'Kanthamee hurled a plasma grenade around the corner. While it did not adhere to the black-armored Sangheili, it did spook him out of cover â€" right into the path of a waiting fuel rod blast.

The voice of the Ancient Ones boomed out, showering 'Kanthamee with accolades. "Two have fallen to your might at once! You coat the ground with the blood of your enemies! Three foes have you slain!"

'Kanthamee ducked around the corner and slapped his last clip into the fuel rod cannon right as the last SpecOps warrior emerged, spraying plasma fire in all directions. The Ship Master allowed himself a smirk before bringing the heavy weapon around to smash into the warrior's side. Off-balance and wounded, the black-armored warrior's shots hissed wide past 'Kanthamee. 'Kanthamee's fuel rod blast did not miss.

"You are an unstoppable instrument of destruction!" the Forerunner thundered in approval.

Discarding the all-but-empty fuel rod cannon, 'Kanthamee stormed into the base. With one last glance for lurking enemies, he swept up the banner in his grasp and sprinted towards the ramp that would lead to the roof of the base and the waiting teleporter. This was predictably accompanied by the announcement "Azure Unit possesses the holy banner!"

As 'Kanthamee's long strides carried him to the top of the ramp, he stopped in momentary shock. Standing squarely between him and the teleporter was Jara 'Lystramee. Almost casually, the SpecOps commander drew the handle of his plasma sword from his weapons harness and activated it.

"I knew you would try to capture it yourself, 'Kanthamee," 'Lystramee hissed. "Let us see how you fare in a clash of _real _weapons, not Ghosts and snipers." He lunged towards 'Kanthamee, sword blade flashing blue-white as it descended towards the Ship Master's torso. However, the gold-armored Sangheili had other plans. Planting his feet, he caught the sword blade on the unbreakable alloy staff holding the sacred banner and threw it off to the side. Abandoning the banner for now â€" which miraculously picked itself up and fluttered upright â€" he drew his own sword and swung at 'Lystramee.

The exchange continued for several more blows, each of which was countered in turn. 'Lystramee was immensely strong and devilishly fast, and he had a book of sword tricks volumes long. Time after

time, 'Kanthamee came within a hairsbreadth of a gory deathâ€¦ at least, a simulated one.

At last, 'Kanthamee sensed an opening. He stuck out with the flat of his other hand, knocking 'Lystramee off-balance for a tiny moment. Seizing the opportunity, he lunged forward, bringing the sword up from underneath. 'Lystramee was a perfect target, still recovering from the shock and not ten feet awayâ€¦

And with suddenness that cast doubt on the existence of inertia, 'Lystramee sidestepped the lunge, clotheslined 'Kanthamee and brought his own energy sword up. The blade burned through the shielding around 'Kanthamee's head and sliced through the Ship Master's helmet, skull and brain in an instant. The gold-armored Sangheili felt an instant of blinding pain, then he was soaring overhead to await respawning.

_Curse it! _'Kanthamee thought in frustration as 'Lystramee indulged in a moment of gloating over his simulated corpse. _I do not think I have ever seen one so skilled at hand-to-hand combat. Now, he will return the banner and make a run at ours!_

As 'Lystramee laughed in triumph, a crimson armored figure trotted over from where it had been watching the duel and unceremoniously smashed its plasma rifle into the commander's spine. With a strangled roar of impotent frustration, 'Lystramee collapsed.

Calmly, Eka 'Thalamee retrieved the banner and clambered on top of 'Duramee's waiting Banshee. The heavily laden craft wobbled a little on takeoff, but then began to climb steadily upwards. 'Kanthamee fought the urge to cheer wildly.

Suddenly, a threat became apparent. The enemies' Specter had respawned, and now two black-armored Sangheili occupied the driver and gunner positions. They swiftly closed on the Banshee, which could not evade the stream of plasma projectiles from the turret â€" if 'Duramee made any evasive moves, the carrier of the banner would plunge to the ground! Instead, 'Duramee set the Banshee on a suicide plunge towards the center of the base.

The Specter's plasma cannon tore great chunks from the Banshee's fuselage, finally burning all the way through it to kill its pilot. However, despite trailing smoke and plasma the Banshee continued on its plummeting course towards the base. Even though he was currently incorporeal, 'Kanthamee held his breath as the aircraft smashed into the top of their teleporter. The plasma power plant overloaded and pieces of the aircraft flew in all directions. One of the wings whirled off on a random path, its engine still providing thrust. A screen of smoke prevented 'Kanthamee from seeing what happened next â€" but whatever happened, a voice thundered over the landscape a mere second later:

"Rejoice! Azure Unit has secured the holy banner!"

The world around him faded away.

'Kanthamee found himself back in the sim-pod, strapped into his seat and staring into the empty darkness. He took three deep breaths, then keyed the hatch release. Purple-hued light flooded into the interior of the pod as the restraints retracted and allowed him to

stand.

Outside, Jara 'Lystramee was already waiting. "That was an excellent performance, Ship Commander," the SpecOps commander commented with little or no resentment in his rumbling voice. "You are quite possibly the finest Ghost pilot I have ever seen" and you have a fell hand with a heavy weapon as well."

Gratified by the praise, 'Kanthamee clasped 'Lystramee's forearm. "And your swordplay was superlative. You had me outmatched from the very beginning. That was amazing!"

"That may well be," 'Lystramee chuckled ruefully, returning the gesture of friendship, "but I would be wise to watch my back more closely. You and your Sangheili did a masterful job of controlling the battlefield from the very opening moments. I would do well to study you."

'Kanthamee grinned. "Then you have no reservations about where ground command is placed when we arrive in-system?"

"None whatsoever, Ship Master."

"Well," 'Kanthamee commented with an irritated click of his mandibles, "I have yet more tedious datapadding to do. I had best be on my way."

'Lystramee cocked his head. "Not time for a round of Control the Holy Skull?"

"Well" 'Kanthamee made a show of consideration. "I suppose if you state it in that manner"

'Kanthamee turned to the Sangheili warrior who stood ever at attention next to his desk. This warrior's armor was colored a dull grey, remarkable in no way, except that it was so unremarkable. A passerby might mistake the warrior for a life-sized replica " and not an especially good one at that. "This is highly irregular, Nameless One," 'Kanthamee mused. "You are certain."

"Certain, Excellency." The gray-armored Sangheili moved his mandibles no more than necessary. Improbably, no other part of its body made the slightest movement.

'Kanthamee shook his head at Nameless One's hoarse-voiced prediction and reviewed the manifest again. There was absolutely no mention of any Eyes of the Prophets or other observers on any vessel of his four-ship battlegroup. For a mission of this importance, the normal pattern was to deploy four or more, at least one per ship.

Still, 'Kanthamee trusted Nameless One's intel. The disgraced Sangheili had proven the equal of any Special Operations Infiltrator in getting ahold of sensitive intelligence and information before passing it on to 'Kanthamee.

'Kanthamee wasted a moment reminiscing about the strange way that Nameless One had come into his command. Rumor had it that Nameless One had once been placed highly in SpecOps; maybe an Eye of the Prophets, perhaps even a commander. However, there had been some incident where the Sangheili had faced the Demon " the one the

humans called Master Chief " and instead of confronting it and facing an honorable death, Nameless One had fled to call in reinforcements. It had been sound tactical thinking, but there had been two problems. One, it hadn't worked and the Demon had escaped. Two, that behavior ran counter to everything that the Sangheili prided themselves upon " bravery, fearlessness, courage.

Nameless One had barely missed a painful and humiliating public execution. What the Council had done instead was strip him of all name, rank and status. In 'Kanthamee's way of thinking, this had been a far worse fate. He had ceased to be a person and instead had become a _thing. _An object to be trod upon and scorned.

'Kanthamee had recognized Nameless One's skill in many useful areas, and upon his ascension to the rank of Ship Master had taken the luckless Sangheili as his personal aide. Ostensibly, it had been as a reminder to himself of the price of cowardice. However, Nameless One had proven immensely useful over the years.

Banishing thoughts of the past, 'Kanthamee tapped the holopad next to his terminal. A humanoid figure that glowed with radiance, complete with two seraphic wings, sprung into existence above the pad. "Yes, Ship Master?" Azrael demanded with a little less courtesy than 'Kanthamee would have preferred.

"Construct, what is our projected arrival time at our target system?"

Azrael paused only a moment as he calculated the answer. "At present course and speed, Holy One, the battlegroup will reach its destination in four point five zero nine hours. I humbly recommend" " "

""preparing for battle," 'Kanthamee finished smoothly. "Of course, construct Azrael. Recheck all ship systems and report to me on their status in four hours."

Azrael glowered silently for a second before bowing. "As you command, Excellency." He shimmered out of existence.

'Kanthamee let out an exasperated sigh. "The computer constructs of the Great Ones may have their uses, but this one is growing tiresome. Perhaps I will have to implement a personality wipe on him."

"When do you wish this to be done?" Nameless One rasped.

"Do not concern yourself," 'Kanthamee chuckled. "I was merely thinking and wishing out loud. No, I have no idea how to bring about such an alteration. He shall have to remain an annoyance for the time being." Nameless One bowed and resumed his motionless vigil.

'Kanthamee returned his attention to the terminal again, checking and double-checking all loadouts. When they arrived in-system, he planned to hit the humans hard, immediately and without mercy. No sense in giving them time to prepare.

Somehow, though, he knew that they would be ready. They always were" |

End
file.